

History of the Institute of Theatre and Opera of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini

The Institute of Theatre and Opera continues the kind of activity previously carried out by the Institute for Literature, Theatre and Music, founded in 1957 by Vittore Branca and Pietro Nardi. Under the subsequent direction of Giuseppe Ortolani, a distinguished Goldoni scholar, the historic Institute then focused more on theatre studies.

The impetus for a much greater interest in opera was the arrival in 1957 of the huge libretto collection of the Roman physician, Ulderico Rolandi: around 30,000 opera librettos dating from the second half of the 16th to the early 20th century. The libretto collection is complemented by a rich thematic library, a large number of scores and a collection of portraits, posters, offprints and newspaper cuttings.

In 1970, the Italianist Gianfranco Folena was appointed director of the Institute. He introduced a linguistic approach to studies in the theatrical and musical disciplines. In the field of opera, he mainly encouraged research into the relationship between music and words. From 1972 to 2000, numerous conferences were held. Promoted by Folena and then by Maria Teresa Muraro and Giovanni Morelli, they were dedicated to a historical survey of the various periods of opera and some of its greatest leading figures from the 17th century to the present day. The annual conferences on opera were attended by scholars from all over the world, and they contributed to reassessing the libretto at a time when stressing its importance seemed an absolute novelty.

Thanks to the possibility of consulting the libretto collection, an international community of scholars was attracted to Venice and the key research resources held by the Fondazione Giorgio Cini. Over recent years in this context, new lines of research and interpretations have been developed through exchanges between the younger generation of researchers and senior scholars: to mention but a few, Lorenzo Bianconi, Claudio Gallico, Wolfgang Osthoff, Pierluigi Petrobelli, Nino Pirrotta, Elena Povoledo, Harold Powers, Ellen Rosand, David Rosen, Mercedes Viale Ferrero, Thomas Walker and Hellmuth Christian Wolff.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the arrival of several donations – especially those presented by Sister Mary Mark and Olga Resnevič Signorelli – led to the creation of the Eleonora Duse Archive.

This provided the Institute with the opportunity to initiate one of the main lines of research that still characterises it today: the study of the life and work of actors at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in the Italian and international theatrical traditions.

In 1985 the Institute changed its name and became the Institute for Literature, Theatre and Opera and, the same year, Giovanni Morelli founded the Institute of Music.

Then, in the late 1980s, the acquisition of the personal archive of the dancer and choreographer Aurél M. Milloss meant that Institute developed into a reference point also for the study of various forms of dance.

Subsequent donations further enhanced the Institute's reputation and defined its fields of study, such as the personal libraries of Gian Francesco Malipiero and Francesco Gallia, which were added to those of Aurél M. Milloss and Ulderico Rolandi.

In 2007, under the direction of Maria Ida Biggi, the name of the Institute changed again, with the aim of underscoring its theatrical interests and splitting them from linguistic and literary interests: the Study Centre for European Theatre and Opera thus came into being.

In the following years, the Study Centre pursued intense work on digitising the iconographic materials in its possession: the Theatre and Music Iconographic Archive now has over 12,000 index cards concerning documents of an interdisciplinary nature, ranging from portraiture to stage design, theatre architecture, costume design, painting and graphic arts. This work took up and further developed a project started in the 1970s by Elena Povoledo and Maria Teresa Muraro: the creation of a collection of large catalogue cards, which had made the Institute a pioneer in research on stage design and theatre iconography.

Over time, the Study Centre had also gradually acquired valuable donations regarding Venetian, Veneto and Italian theatre of the second half of the 20th century. This included archives of major figures such as Luigi Squarzina, Titina Rota, Pierluigi Samaritani, Elena Povoledo, Maurizio Scaparro, Giovanni Poli, Mischa Scandella and Arnaldo Momo.

For further details on the individual archives and the artists and scholars whose memory they preserve, see Archives.